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VISITING TEAM FOCUSES ON LOUISIANA EDUCATION REFORMS

BATON ROUGE – Representatives from a national education organization were here this week (Feb. 4-6) to review Louisiana's reform initiatives in elementary, secondary and higher education as part of a nationwide federally-funded case study.

Commissioner of Higher Education Joseph Savoie described the study as a "welcomed opportunity to demonstrate to the rest of the nation the progress the Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, or BESE, are making in reforming public education at all levels."

Louisiana is the only state in the Deep South to be selected for this national study which is being conducted by the State Higher Education Executive Officers, or SHEEO. The study will specifically highlight emerging state reform initiatives in pre-kindergarten through university levels that have been designed to drive systemic education reforms.

Louisiana was one of five states chosen from 40 states considered for selection to participate in the program. The other four are California, Illinois, Maryland and Rhode Island. The study is scheduled to be completed later this year.

State Senator Gerald Theunissen of Jennings, La., who chairs the Senate Education Committee, told the visiting team that Governor Foster and legislators have made education and student achievement a top priority. "Every initiative," he said, "is focused on that one goal."

State Representative and House Education Committee chairman Carl Crane of Baton Rouge agreed with Theunissen.

"This is the first time," he said, "that all parties involved in education – the governor,

Legislature, the Board of Regents and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education – have all come together to increase student achievement. Governor Foster is committed to improving education and workforce development in this state. That has been the catalyst for everything we have done.”

Representing Governor Foster was Andy Kopplin, the governor assistant chief of staff. “The governor,” he said, “has put money where his mouth is. He has made it clear that building education is a top priority.”

Kopplin described advances made in elementary and secondary education since 1996, including increased funding for teacher pay, operating budgets and technology. In higher education, Kopplin briefly described a list of reforms initiated by the Foster administration, including creation of the Louisiana Community and Technical College system, reorganization of higher education governance, the Tuition Opportunity Plan for Students (TOPS), and increased funding for new campus technology, endowed chairs and professorships, research and library equipment, campus maintenance, gene therapy research, workforce development and industry-based certification programs.

“In addition,” Kopplin said, “there has been a \$253 million increase in new, recurring funds, ranking Louisiana fourth in the nation in funding growth.”

The three-year SHEEO study is part of the national education reform initiative “Building Statewide K-16 Systems for Student Success” sponsored by SHEEO with funding from four U.S. Department of Education programs, including Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs-GEAR-UP, HEA Title II-Teacher Quality Enhancement Program, Preparing Tomorrow’s Teachers to Use Technology, and the National School-to-Work Office.

The goal of the joint SHEEO and U.S. Department of Education initiative is to build and strengthen connections across federal and state programs within each state through elementary, secondary and postsecondary education , or K-16, partnerships.

“While we understand that many programs are just beginning [in Louisiana],” said SHEEO associate executive director Esther Rodriguez last May when the study was first announced, “we are impressed with the various initiatives underway in Louisiana and believe that together they make up an integrated, comprehensive K-16 effort that could provide a model that other states may want to emulate.”

The visiting study team included representatives from the staffs of SHEEO and the U.S. Department of Education, senior state K-12 and postsecondary officials from across the country, and representatives from national education organizations such as the Education Commission of the States, the Southern Regional Education Board, the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, and The College Board.

The case study is focused on six areas, including early outreach programs, student financial aid and other incentives, teacher quality initiatives, curriculum development and assessment of learning, data and accountability systems, and statewide leadership structures.

Louisiana's education reform efforts were driven by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Teacher Quality, formed by Governor Foster in 1999 as a joint venture between the Board of Regents and BESE. The commission's charge was to study and make recommendations that would result in substantive reforms in elementary, secondary and postsecondary education. Its membership consisted of teachers, university faculty and administrators, school superintendents, business people, private citizens and legislators.

"This case study selection validates the hard work that many people have been doing to enhance the educational system in our state," Savoie said. "I am delighted that Louisiana's education reforms continue to draw national attention, but we still have much work to do."

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